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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## A NEW YORK FAMILY<sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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AN impassioned historian on the staff of a New York newspaper, marveling the day after at the warmth of our greeting to the Marshal of France, spoke of the transformed face of New York—"New York, the cold, cynical city"; and other equally astonished commentators in what statesmen call "the public press" drew companion pictures of a New York marvellously aroused out of its normal condition of bored and sophisticated indifference. This sort of nonsense is of a piece with the chatter of "society editors" and music reporters who love to describe the audiences at the Metropolitan Opera House as "coldly critical," "exact-ing," "blasé." It is only a little less absurd than the inimitably naïve picture of New York that emerges out of the *Van Bibber* stories of Mr. Richard Harding Davis; it is only a little less myopic than the blandly obtuse presentment of Mrs. Wharton. Mr. Davis, of course, could never see New York except from the conning-tower of the Delmonico café; and it is quite hopeless to try to align the New York perceived by Mrs. Wharton with any authentic experience of, say, a Bronx express at six in the evening: her fictional New York plebeians have the same atmosphere of infinite remoteness from fact with which the life and manners of Mrs. Wharton's own class are enwrapped by the average Broadway concocter of drawing-room comedy.

Those who best know the actual New York—the New York that is not encompassed by the stately romantic traditions of the "city-room" of a newspaper: that is not co-extensive either with country-houses and motors and the

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<sup>1</sup>*His Family*, by Ernest Poole. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917.

intellectual orgies of the Colony Club, or with the validities of a flat in the Bronx or the cabarets of Longacre Square or the pushcarts and tenements of Delancy Street—these involuntarily honest observers and students of the amazing city know that New York is less “cold” and “cynical” than it is excitable and naïve. They know that those fabulous opera audiences which are legendarily supposed to behave like blasé and infinitely sophisticated connoisseurs are actually, as a whole, notable for their childlike and gargantuan appetite for elementary esthetic satisfactions. They know that the essential New York is not revealable either through the juvenile snobbery of Mr. Davis, or the indurated exquisiteness of Mrs. Wharton, or the vivid sentimentalism of O. Henry: they know that it is at once far simpler and far subtler, far nearer and far remoter, than such approaches can master and interpret.

We shall not say that Mr. Ernest Poole in his latest portrayal of New York life is an unimpeded interpreter; but at least he is free from many usual inhibitions. He is free, for example, from Mrs. Wharton’s complacent detachment and unawareness, from Mr. Davis’s primitive romanticism, from the lesions that sentimentalism wrought in the imaginative structure of O. Henry’s often veracious art. We do not know if Mr. Poole, through identification of kinship, has New York in his blood and bones—of course he need not have, in order to know her and love her and detest her with adequate knowledge and sympathy; but in this new chronicle of his he sometimes writes with the sureness of filial intimacy. Certainly the tale of *His Family* is the tale of a family peculiarly and essentially of New York: it is not easy to conceive them as rooted in Chicago, or Philadelphia, or Baltimore, or Boston, or Cincinnati. They are as untransferably of New York as they are untransferably American.

Roger Gale had never wholly grown into the New York whereby, at sixty, he found himself surrounded. It was a younger New York to which, as a boy, he had come from the New Hampshire hills—the New York of hansom cabs and hotels on Madison Square, of separate homes, of quiet streets lined with trees: the New York of the old Academy of Music. Riding uptown from Washington Square on top of a bus he perceived, now, the new New York, an incomparably different New York—the sprawling, inchoate, sor-

did, poetic, gorgeous, brutal, febrile, unbridled, ingenuous New York of to-day,—multifarious, revolting, adorable; but, for him, undecipherable and subtly alien.

Later, he climbs protestingly the endless stairs to the gallery at Carnegie Hall for a Sunday afternoon concert, where, listening to the *Symphonie Pathétique* of Tchaikovsky, he remembers the so different Sunday afternoons of an earlier New York, to which a concert on the Sabbath would have seemed a step toward the Pit—those distant, unrestful, congested Sundays of inappeasable church-going and monstrously carnal midday dinners and **gorged naps** and expiatory cold suppers and evenings with hymns about the piano—unwholesome days, with piety made as indigestible as the midday meal, yet living with a faint, perverse sweetness in the memory.

How different the present! Watching the crowded gallery at this Sunday concert, he became aware that more than half of those who listened, immersed in the black current of Tchaikovsky's tragical yearning, were foreigners. "Out of the mass from every side individual faces emerged, swarthy, weird, and staring hungrily into space. And to Roger the whole shadowy place, the very air, grew pregnant, charged with all these inner lives bound together in this mood, this mystery that had swept over them all, immense and formless, baffling, this furious demanding and this blind wistful groping which he himself had known so well ever since his wife had died and he had lost his faith in God." It is his daughter Deborah, quick-souled and clairvoyant, absorbed in the work of her slum-schools, who deepens the vision, in a briefly poignant indication of a New York alien to Mrs. Wharton, patronized by Mr. Davis, exploited by O. Henry: "I was thinking of hungry people—millions of them, now, this minute, not only here, but in so many places—concerts, movies, libraries. Hungry, oh, for everything—life, its beauty, all it means. And I was thinking this is youth—no matter how old they happen to be—and that to feed it we have schools. I was thinking how little we've done as yet, and of all that we're sure to do in the many, many years ahead. . . ." It was still later, when he went with Deborah to see her at work in her East Side school, that Roger had a glimpse of the moving potentialities of that vast and terrible and endless parturition that is New York.

Out of such revealingly chosen elements, with fidelity and imaginative justice, Mr. Poole assembles a veracious picture of the New York of our time. There are moments when one wishes that he would scrutinize his product more anxiously. Roger's jaw "sets hard" on page 66; it "sets tight" again on page 266. John, another character, also "sets his jaws." Roger "savagely bites off a cigar." Deborah's face "went white" when her father told her he had not long to live. Roger feels "a tightening at his throat" as he looks up at the stars; and those stars are "frosty." His face "darkens," and he feels "hot tears" in his eyes. Edith's "limbs" are "softly rounded." Such worn and battered stereotypes do well enough for the machine-made fiction of commerce. They are not good enough for Mr. Poole—they ill serve the needs of any fiction which strives for an honest and closely-studied notation of character, for a scrupulously faithful transcript of life. Let Mr. Poole read Mark Twain's essay on the consummate "stage-directions" in the novels of Mr. Howells.

This book is chiefly to be prized as a picture of Mr. Poole's own soul—a picture that one likes to remember for heartenment and reassurance. It rewards the best that one can bring to it. Contrived with singular and unimpeachable sincerity, it is written out of a fullness of compassionate insight, with a gentleness of the heart that gravely puts away all sentimental lures. It has spiritual penetration and latitude and elevation. It is filled throughout with a deep and intimate consciousness of the reality of other souls.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.